



## **The Structure of American Public Libraries** **Holly Murten and Nancy Rajczak**

**January 20, 2006**

Public libraries in America are a community center for books and information. They provide a sense of place – or community identity – and support family literacy, foster lifelong learning, and help immigrants find their way in a new land. The public library opens the door to information – and to knowledge -- to people of all ages, abilities, ethnic backgrounds and economic status.

There are two basic characteristics about public libraries:

- Collects & organizes materials and makes them available to people in a specific geographic area.
- Supported mainly through state and/or local public funding revenues.

Beyond these two very general points, each library in America is unique. Public libraries count among America's largest libraries – and certainly also the smallest.

According to the American Library Association, 9,210 public libraries currently operate in the U.S. with over 16,000 service points. Service points include main libraries, branches and bookmobiles. These libraries employ 136,000 paid, full-time staff – 22% of who have a Masters of Library or Information Science.

Public libraries receive most of their revenue from the unit of local government of which they are a part. As of 2003, 53% of U.S. public libraries were part of a municipal government, and 10% were part of a county government (with the remainder reporting various other situations of legal basis, including nonprofit associations). In 2003, the percentage breakdown for sources of revenue (or operating income) was 80% local, 10.9% state, 0.5% federal, and 8.6% other.

The National Center for Education Statistics establishes that American public libraries had a combined operating income of \$8.3 billion in 2003. American public libraries spend an average of \$30.97 per capita. The state of Ohio leads the country in library funding. It spends an average of \$60 per capita. The state of Mississippi has the lowest level of funding, at \$13.42.

American public libraries circulate almost 2 billion items a year. That averages out to about 6.8 materials circulated per person.

Thanks to Bill Gates, Internet access is available at 93% of American public libraries.

### **History**

Public libraries are deeply rooted in the history of the United States.

At the heart of the public library movement, there has always been a strong belief that readily accessible reading and information is important to the progress of democracy. Along with their quest for religious freedom, the earliest English settlers brought with them an interest in collecting & sharing books.



Benjamin Franklin, 1706-1790

### **Subscription Libraries, 1731**

“And now I set on foot my first project of a public nature, that for a subscription library. I drew up the proposals, got them put into form by our great scrivener, Brockden, and, by the help of my friends in the Junto, procured fifty subscribers of forty shillings each to begin with, and ten shillings a year for fifty years, the term our company was to continue. We afterwards obtain'd a charter, the company being increased to one hundred: this was the mother of all the North American subscription libraries, now so numerous. It is become a great thing itself, and continually increasing. These libraries have improved the general conversation of the Americans, made the common tradesmen and farmers as intelligent as most gentlemen from other countries, and perhaps have contributed in some degree to the stand so generally made throughout the colonies in defense of their privileges.”

Ben Franklin's “subscription library” in Philadelphia is probably the best-known predecessor of today's public libraries. Because books were expensive and hard to find in colonial America, Franklin pooled the resources of a number of people. These libraries were rooted in the association of individuals for mutual enlightenment & discussion. But they were still limited to only those who could afford to buy their way into the club.

The steps to legislation that made it possible for communities to tax themselves for public libraries are similar to the process of policy development today and began with the concept of universal education and public schools.

In 1833, the 1,934 residents of Peterborough, New Hampshire, took that idea a step further. They recognized the need for public information in the form of books that could be available to everyone at no charge. They approved the first tax to support a free public library and following the education models of the times, appointed a board of directors, or as it often called in the United States, a board of trustees, to govern it. These two features -- legislation for regular tax support and a governing library board – are still the basic features of public library organization in America today.

New Hampshire was also the first state to enact a law. In 1849, “An Act Providing for the Establishment of Public Libraries” was passed, assuring continual support for public libraries from taxes.

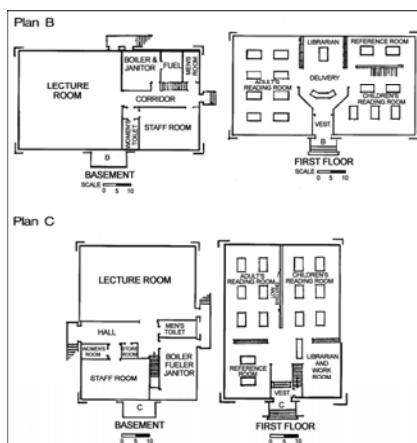
The main momentum, however, in the development of public libraries came from the establishment of the Boston Public Library in 1854. Boston's argument for the public library was also firmly rooted in the idea of public education. Public libraries were characterized as providing the resources for citizens to become informed about events and therefore able to participate in the democratic process.

This decision of a major city had tremendous impact on the rest of the growing country. Starting in 1850, library laws were passed quickly in many states. These laws outlined the roles and responsibilities of trustees or board of directors. They also authorized taxation for library support, and maintained independence for the library board.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century also saw the continued rise of public education. Women particularly benefited. Women's organizations all over the country became a positive force – from serving the poor, the young, the immigrant – to devoting themselves to the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, public health and education. In many communities it was through the efforts of serious fundraising and many hours of volunteer work that the need for a public library was recognized and the dream became a reality.

The American Library Association (ALA) was founded in 1876. The formation of ALA gave a voice to library workers, as well as a forum to discuss professional issues.

It was also about this time, that post-Civil War industrialists like Andrew Carnegie accumulated huge fortunes. Although he was known as a ruthless businessman, one of Carnegie's lifelong interests was the establishment of free public libraries. He was the Bill Gates of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Carnegie's legacy today is his donation of over \$56 million for the construction of almost 2,509 libraries. Carnegie provided construction money for library buildings – but only if the community provided the land and stocked the building with books and furniture. The community also had to pledge annual funding to support and operate the library. Carnegie's great contribution to the idea of the public library was that it needed to be supported by the people of a community.



Typical floor plan of a Carnegie library.

His building designs deliberately made the library more welcoming and provided for community meeting space. These were buildings that were designed specifically to bring people and books together. Books were no longer chained to reading stands or kept in closed stacks but were out on open shelves in large rooms and easily available for public use.

Philanthropy, the professionalization of librarianship through ALA, and the growing involvement of women in the political process were the fuel that moved the public library idea to catch fire.

By 1918, publicly funded libraries, served by boards of trustees, were generally accepted as a standard component of public services in a city or town, along with police and fire protection.

## Libraries and the Political Process

Today, operating a public library anywhere requires an awareness of the political process. From the enactment of the first laws for tax-supported libraries in the 1850s to the struggle to de-link federal funds from Internet filtering mandates in 2003, involvement in politics has been central to the progress of libraries.

“Public librarians are inescapably a part of government and involved in ‘politics’”.

(Garceau, *The Public Library in the Political Process*, 1949).

Laws governing libraries do not mandate their existence. This is an important distinction. States and cities can choose – or not – to fund a library. While the legislation does not require the establishment of libraries, it outlines conditions for their operation where they exist.

It is critical that librarians understand their political environments, because the governance – and funding – of each public library takes place within an overlapping structure of local, regional, state, and national political bodies. Librarians and library advocates must work hard to educate policy makers about the fiscal and legal needs of libraries.

ALA Presidents have made library advocacy the centerpiece of their presidential year, and ALA's Public Awareness Advisory Committee has developed online toolkits for advocacy, workshops and programs. Briefings on key topics are prepared to assist local library advocates explain

important issues to policymakers. ALA's national legislative day is held each year in May to bring librarians, library trustees, board members and other library friends to Washington, DC, to talk with their representatives and senators about issues of concern, such as privacy, copyright, and Internet filtering. ALA launched the "Campaign for America's Libraries" in 2001 to integrate various public relations initiatives and provide librarians with the tools necessary to accomplish this.

Although there is no national law for libraries, the federal government has provided funding for public libraries since the end of WWII. State libraries administer federal funds from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). These are mostly grants based on specific projects that emphasize – and require – libraries to partner with other institutions in the area. This collaboration with other cultural heritage institutions and social service agencies is expected to transform the public library in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Some of the trends that will define the future of public libraries in the United States:

- Developing a sense of place for the library
- Community & regional partnerships
- The increase in scope & importance of federal legislation (CIPA, PATRIOT Act) on libraries
- Aging population with a strong sense of community spirit
- Aging librarians & recruitment into the profession

### **Planning and Standards**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, making the case for public library support will continue to be a central task of the library profession. Once the idea of the library as an agency worthy of community funding was established, the profession looked for ways to identify norms and guidelines to help make their case.

Initially librarians relied on statistics and checklists, but in the mid-1960s, the Public Library Association – created in 1950 to accommodate structural adjustments within ALA – changed its tactics. They initiated an approach that continues to this day and encourages each library to develop its own goals to reflect real community needs.

In the 1980s, PLA identified eight potential roles for public libraries as well as a range of efforts for how to reach them. To support this initiative, called *Planning and Role Setting for Public Libraries*, they launched training and facilitation sessions, introduced output measures for services for children and young adults, and provided an annual data service report. The idea was that libraries could select one or more roles best suited to their various communities and therefore better concentrate their resources. Potential roles included:

- Community activities center
- Community information center
- Formal education support center
- Independent learning center
- Popular materials library
- Preschoolers door to learning
- Reference library
- Research center

In 2001's *The New Planning for Results*, PLA updated these roles and expanded them to include "library service responses", which address a variety of community needs ranging from Basic Literacy to Information Literacy and Cultural Awareness. A planning process was outlined including a description of what the library will do and provide to address these community needs and library responses. The process includes identifying:

- Target audiences and service aspects
- Resource allocation issues framed within the library infrastructure of staff, collections, facilities, and technology

- Possible "outcomes" measures to consider when developing objectives

Although planning may be more effective for the actual development and delivery of library service, librarians and library advocates recognize that it is also compelling to make their case to decision-makers with quantitative comparisons in hand. Particularly at the state level, data and statistics are still used – in collaboration with the planning process – to make the case for library support.

Today, under the mandate of the National Education Statistics Act of 1994, the National Center for Educational Statistics collects information through a program called the "Public Libraries Survey". A designated data coordinator at each state library collects information from public libraries in their respective states.

### **The Role of State Libraries**

State libraries are important for a number of other reasons. They collaborate with public librarians to coordinate the development of state plans, and they administer IMLS project funds. And as we've seen, it's state law that provides the enabling legislation for public libraries.

Library laws of most states can be found at the web site for the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA), which lists a profile of each state library as well as state plans for public libraries.

A review of the plans provides an understanding of the various missions and goals that each state has identified. The plans include a description of stakeholder involvement, the monitoring process, and evaluation.

For example, the California plan for 2006 identifies six key issues:

- The economic gap between "haves" and "have nots"
- Increased diversity and growth of the population
- Technology benefits and challenges
- Partnership and collaboration
- Staying relevant – providing services and programs responsive to the community and having the community aware of them.

Within the states, about 400 library cooperatives aid and promote library operations – often with a multitype library focus. Additionally, regional cooperatives such as SOLINET and PALINET provide services across several states. 76% of public libraries are members of a system or cooperative service.

### **Local Funding and Management**

It takes, however, many people on the local level – the library board of trustees, library workers, and volunteers – working together to put in place a library that best meets the needs of each individual community.

This is because it's local tax dollars that provide the primary funding for public libraries. 79% of public library funding comes from local sources – mostly property taxes – while 12% comes from state sources, 1% from federal sources, and 9% from other sources – such as foundations, corporations, individual donations, and Friends of Libraries groups.

Oversight of most public libraries in the U.S. is by a group of citizens – usually called a board of trustees or directors, or simply the library board. They receive no salary or other form of compensation and usually serve for periods of 2-8 years. This citizen body has its roots in the structure of the Boston Public Library and parallels the school board in many ways.

The enabling legislation for public libraries in each state generally specifies the composition and method of appointment of the library board. Commonly appointed, but sometimes elected, the library board plays either an advisory or an administrative role.

They typically meet once a month with the library director and have responsibility for a range of functions:

- Analysis of community needs
- Articulating the importance of the library to the general public
- Hiring or recommending the director
- Acting in an advocacy role to develop community support for taxation and bond issues
- Budget review and approval
- Policy review and approval
- Commitment to freedom of inquiry and expression
- Formulation of long-range planning

Library board members are supported in their work by national and state level associations. The ALA Association for Library Trustees Advocates (ALTA), founded in 1890, offers educational and training programs for board members. State library associations and state libraries also provide programs and publications that focus on state-specific issues. Wisconsin, for example, publishes *Trustee Essentials*, a handbook that includes a job description that defines the board member's function:

“Participate as a member of a team (the library board) to protect and advance the interests of the broader community by effectively governing the operations and promoting the development of the local public library.”

It is the persistence and advocacy of library boards that provide the community support for building programs, increased taxes or even new operational structures.

Library Boards of Trustees are the link between the community and the library. They serve as the community's voice in library matters. An Illinois survey found that the state's trustees contributed over 250,000 hours of time in a single year.

While library boards are out working their magic, library administrators and directors bring professional expertise and formally represent the library in community organizations, while staff members implement the policies adopted by the board and provide daily service. 60-70% of most libraries' budgets is allocated to staff and benefits.

Regardless of library size, most public libraries have a special volunteer organization called the Friends of the Library. These registered nonprofit organizations can have a small membership of 10-15 people, or a membership numbering in the thousands. Examples of their contributions include fundraising through library endowment development, book sales, cafes, and other philanthropic efforts. The best source of information on forming and nurturing Friends groups is their FOLUSA web site.

Private foundations also help by awarding grants for special projects. These are public charities that are nonprofit, tax-exempt, publicly supported, grant-making organizations. For example, the Gates Foundation – the largest foundation award to public libraries since the Carnegie building grants – brought 40,000 computers and training to libraries in all 50 states, with a focus on the most needy.

Last but not least, volunteers are an important part of the library organization. Volunteers supplement staff; they do not replace them. Their activities range from shelving books, checking materials in and out, helping out at information desks and computers, doing children's programs, and offering behind-the-scenes support. While many come to the library from organized Friends

groups, some library web sites provide online applications for volunteers and assign a volunteer coordinator. A statewide survey in Florida in 2000 reported that volunteers contributed the equivalent of 722 hours of full-time work, or nearly 29,000 hours per week.

Volunteers do more than help out at the library; they are often the best source of anecdotes – or stories – that decision-makers can appreciate. People relate to storytelling more than statistics and reports. Anecdotal stories, told in human interest terms, can be an eye-opener to the library board and give officials and the general public a better picture of what the library means to the community.

### **“America @ your library” Initiative**

And that is the bottom line: increasing awareness and support for libraries. The American Library Association’s “@ your library” campaign communicates clearly and strongly why libraries are both unique and valuable. The campaign brings librarians to the table at public policy discussions on key issues: intellectual freedom, equity of access, narrowing the digital divide, and intercultural communication. These are issues that are important to libraries everywhere, not just in the United States. That is why the US Diplomatic Mission to Germany has adopted the “@ your library” slogan as the centerpiece of its partnership initiative with German public libraries.

Specifically, the “America @ your library” initiative will be the platform for the development of tools and materials to help German libraries and librarians provide information about the United States based on the needs of their community and to work together with American librarians on topics vital to the profession on both sides of the Atlantic.

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***For more information, see the following web links:***

American Library Association

“@ your library” - About The Campaign for America's Libraries

<http://www.ala.org/ala/pio/campaign/aboutyourlibrary/aboutyourlibrary.htm>

Association for Library Trustees and Advocates (ALTA)

<http://www.ala.org/ala/alta/alta.htm>

Office of Government Relations

<http://www.ala.org/ala/washoff/ogr/ogrofficegovernment.htm>

(accessed January 24, 2006)

The Nation's Largest Libraries

<http://www.ala.org/ala/alalibrary/libraryfactsheet/alalibraryfactsheet22.htm>

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation - Global Libraries program

<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/Libraries/>

California Library Laws 2005. California State Library

<http://www.library.ca.gov/laws/>

Carnegie Foundation, The Carnegie Legacy

<http://www.carnegie.org/sub/kids/legacy.html>

Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA)

<http://www.cosla.org/>

Friends of Libraries U.S.A.

<http://www.folusa.org/>

Institute of Museum and Library Services

<http://www.imls.gov>

Mid-Atlantic Library Network (PALINET)

<http://www.palinet.org/>

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Library Statistics Program: Public Libraries.

<http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/libraries/Public.asp>

Public Library Association

<http://www.pla.org/>

Seattle Public Library Foundation

<http://foundation.spl.org/>

Southeastern Library Network (SOLINET)

<http://www.solinet.net/>

Wisconsin Division for Libraries, Technology, and Community Learning

Public Library Development Team

<http://dpi.wi.gov/pld/index.htm>